Two Dubliners, defined by their deaths

Brenda Power looks behind the labels given to two young people after their tragic deaths

THE PROSTITUTE and the suicide. It sounds like a macabre illustration from a Tarot card, a crude line drawing to represent damnation and despair. They are the most ancient and evocative symbols, the whore and the felo de se, twin totems of extreme and contemptible self-disgust to induce a shudder in respectable and right-thinking people.

And yet these were the very symbols used to label two young Dublin people on account of the means and the circumstances of their tragic deaths last week. Two lost children, barely old enough to drive a car or vote or marry, are now defined, for the public's fleeting interest and their families' enduring memories, by the newsworthiness of their ends. Sinead Kelly was 21 years old. She was two when the Pope came to Galway and told the young people of Ireland that he loved them, she was four when Princess Diana married Prince Charles and the 10 hungerstrikers died and the Stardust burned down, she was 10 when Johnny Logan won the Eurovision the second time and 11 when a Pan-Am jet crashed at Lockerbie, she was barely old enough to remember a time when Charles Haughey was a respected Taoiseach and Ireland had a soccer team before Jack Charlton came along and school-leavers couldn't find jobs and the Celtic Tiger was still a cub and cool smart young Dubliners weren't the envy of the world.

Somewhere along the way, while all those startling and unimagined changes were happening for the country, Sinead Kelly got hooked on heroin and worked the streets to pay for her addiction and got raped and beaten up and, finally, got murdered on a canal bank last week. Initial news reports of her murder discreetly mentioned that she was "known to gardai" and had been working in the area — which appears like a nice way of telling respectable young girls that there was really no need for widespread panic about the possibility that an indiscriminate serial killer was on the loose — but pretty soon precision, and a measure of judgement, required that Sinead Kelly be exposed. She was a prostitute. She wasn't a 'good' girl walking home from a late shift or a club when she was set upon by a stranger, instead she belonged in the murky nighttown where they have their own rules and laws.

The savage stabbing of a prostitute by a frenzied attacker, who might well strike again, evokes echoes of the serial mystery drama that so titillated the Victorians, and which remains thrillingly unsolved: was Jack the Ripper a nobleman, a professional man, an aristocrat, or even a royal? The fact that he could have been any of these, just as the killer of Sinead Kelly could be a professional man, a surgeon, a judge, a celebrity, proves that hypocrisy about prostitution is something else that has survived since Victorian times.

Though the revelation that she was a desperate drug addict has put some human shape on the bones of the grim Tarot figure, to the gardai who "knew" her and moved her on from time to time, she was a prostitute. To the men who paid for her services, she was a prostitute. She was the sinner and they could get back into their cars and return to their cosy homes and families satisfied that the moral order was intact.

And yet if it was not for those men and their willingness to buy young women's bodies without ever having to consider the circumstances that might have made them sell, Sinead Kelly would not be working the canal bank, and she would not be dead. She was a prostitute, and they are... who, exactly?

Are they "known" to gardai? Are they harassed and hauled before the courts and publicly shamed as regularly as they ought to be? Are they known to society by their rightful label? And will they all be taken in for questioning about Sinead's death? Or is the image of the prostitute meeting a shamefully predictable fate just too striking and graphic to resist?

The image of the young suicide floating face down in the Liffey was just that. However much *The Star* may huff and puff about its justification, however much the editorial writer may claim to have agonised before publishing that picture, the truth is that it was too haunting, too shocking, too compelling to waste.

It was an extraordinary shot, with the bright colours of the boy's clothes smudged and shimmering under the calm black waters, it had the quality of a medieval oil rendering of the dead Ophelia. It must have sold papers like hot cakes, and if there was debate within the newspaper office over the wisdom of running the picture, I suspect it weighed the amount of flak they'd take against the number of copies they'd sell.

Suicide is shocking, it's true, the statistics are alarming, people are deeply reluctant to be confronted with the reality, which is probably why the reasons people kill themselves are considered the last great imponderable. Certainly when Pat Tierney tried to explain, through this newspaper, why he felt suicide was his only option, nobody wanted to listen. We were told we should have tipped off the gardai and had him locked up for his own good, as though it was that easy to deflect suicidal intent.

Maybe, some time in the future, when the suicide statistics are even more shocking than they are today, his story might be revisited by commentators who are less partisan and more willing to learn. But publishing pictures of unnamed dead boys before their families are notified has quite the opposite of an enlightening effect. It strengthens taboos by implying that suicides, by their actions, forfeit the dignity society accords other deceased persons and, far from promoting understanding, it peddles a modern take on titillating unsolveable mystery.

● **PROFILE:** Michael Flatley ●

Twinkletoed millionaire calls it a day

The Chicago-born son of emigrants from Clare, with the eight-figure bank balance, gives his last Irish performance this weekend, writes **Conor Lally**

THE cracks began to appear in Australia. When he collapsed on a Brisbane stage in November last year and was taken to hospital they said the writing was on the wall. When he said he was coming to Dublin in June they said it would be his swansong, that at 39 he was past it, too old to Carry on Dancing. At first he denied the rumours about hanging up the dancing shoes: "When I'm ready to tell you what I'm going to do I'll tell you," he told reporters.

Despite what he might like to believe, Michael Flatley's number is up. He will grace an Irish stage for the last time this weekend and will give his last performance ever next month in Hyde Park in London.

Irish dancing has never really been cool and in some quarters has been regarded at downright tacky, but somehow Flatley has transcended the criticism and sniggering. Looking most of the time like a cross between a downsized Chippendale and a would-be Finn MacCool — all waxed chest, headbands and embroidered dance kit — he has achieved the impossible and made millions from an oul jig.

When he burst on to the stage at the Point Theatre in Dublin in 1994, exuding enough charisma to start a religion and perspiring at such a rate that Moses himself would have been hard pressed to part the puddles he left in his wake, even the most doubting of punters were converted by this most impish and tackiest of Irish-Americans.

Flatley was born in Chicago in 1958. His mother Eilish and father, also Michael, emigrated to the US from Clare in 1947. Flatley's father worked in the construction industry and taught his sons how to box so they would know how to look after themselves. He set up his own sewer drainage business which is now run by his other son Patrick — there are five Flatley siblings.

Michael Jnr began dancing when he was 11, and by the age of 17 had become the first American to win the World Irish Dancing Championships. At that time Irish dancing didn't put bread on the table, so he took labouring jobs, and supplemented his income playing the flute. He has also reputedly worked as a stockbroker and a professional gambler. In 1981 he started his dancing career proper with the Chieftains.

He danced with the band for the next 14 years, and half way through that time, such was his inflated opinion of himself that he asked if he could join the band. His request was met with disbelief. "He wasn't going to be recording with us, just dancing. I was flummoxed when he asked," Paddy Moloney of the Chieftains said later.

It was during his stint with the band that he met his Polish-born wife, Beata Dziaba. He separated from her two years ago.

"Some people might think I'm crazy to walk away from the most beautiful woman in the world," he said after they split. "But I'm a driven individual. I've dedicated myself to my shows. Maybe years from now I'll look back and say I've been an idiot. But what will people say then? Will it be 'That guy put on a beautiful show'? Or will they say: 'That guy had a nice marriage'? That's the difference."

The thing about Michael Flatley is that despite his millions and being a household name throughout the world, he is still dogged with paranoia about what *they* will say. He reportedly cries when he reads bad reviews, and has been "torn apart" by his acrimonious split with Moya Doherty, with whom he worked on the original *Riverdance* show.

"I'll tell you one thing that really, really gets to him," said Gerry Ryan of RTE. "As an Irish-American who considers himself almost to have come home here, he just simply cannot understand why he has been absolutely lambasted by the gossip columns in this country, I'm telling you, it really does hurt him." Having presented the Eurovision Song Contest in 1994 at which *Riverdance* was unveiled, Ryan insists that it was obvious from the very early stages that Moya Doherty and Flatley were on to a good thing with their hordes of sexy, talented dancers.

"The real litmus test for me was the reaction of the technical crew working in the Point that week during rehearsals. These people have seen everything, they are the most cynical and the hardest to impress. But every time the rehearsing started they all downed tools and looked on open-jawed, it was just so spectacular and ground-breaking."

Elaine Comyn, who worked for RTE publicity during the Eurovision, recalls with almost disbelief the way Flatley and his co-star Jean Butler were nobodies one day and megastars the next.

"Nobody had really heard of him. I rang around a few journalists I knew and managed to get a few small articles into various papers, but nobody really wanted to know.

"Then when I saw Michael and the whole *Riverdance* thing during the Eurovision interval I just started crying. I know that might sound a bit corny now but at the time when I saw it first it was mind-blowing.

"We've gone for a drink sometimes and we would talk more about me than him, even though people would come up to him asking him for his autograph," claims Comyn.

Not everybody, though, has enjoyed such good relations with Flatley. In October 1995 he had a much-documented falling out with Moya Doherty. Flatley reportedly made a pay demand to top up his £50,000-a-week wage but he claims all he wanted was artistic control over the dances he created. Moya Doherty hit back, saying that while Flatley might have been the principle performer in *Riverdance* he was never a partner. The two could not reach a compromise and the day before the second London run of *Riverdance* was about to open, Flatley quit.

He created his own show *Lord of the Dance*, took on a new manager, John Reid, and unveiled his new creation in June 1996. But he fell out with Reid after just 14 months.

When *The Sunday Tribune* rang Reid in London last week a spokesman laughed when he heard we wanted to talk about Flatley. "Somehow I don't think John will want to talk to you. I'll ask him anyway but don't hold your breath."

Bill Whelan, the composer of the music for *Riverdance*, proved equally elusive once the words Michael Flatley were mentioned. One minute a spokeswoman from his Irish agents said Whelan was in the office with her and she would see if he could talk; seconds later Bill Whelan was on his way to Galway, "will be unavailable for the weekend, but wishes *The Sunday Tribune* luck with its article".

Whatever the reasons for Flatley's fallings out with managers and partners, his income since he shot to fame just four years ago has more than compensated for any bad blood he has encountered. In 1996 and 1997, *Forbes* magazine estimated, he made £54m — more than U2, the Spice Girls, Kevin Costner or Eddie Murphy.

After the curtain comes down on his *Lord of the Dance* show for the final time next month it is still anybody's guess what Flatley will do. As reported by *The Sunday Tribune*, he has had talks about reviving his boxing career by signing up with professional promoter Barry Hearn. Others have said that he plans to act and that the reason for his row with John Reid was over what Reid did not do for his movie career.

"I can't see him acting," says Gerry Ryan, who describes Flatley as a friend. "The thing is, he's not an eejit. He knows what he can and can't do. I could certainly see him doing more choreography and turning into a modern-day Gene Kelly. He says first he wants to take some time off. If I was him I'd take the money and sit on a yacht for the rest of my life, but not Michael. There's no way he will take time off; he is simply a compulsive worker."

CURRICULUM VITAE

Name: Michael Flatley
Age: 39
Married: Once, for 10 years, to Polish woman Beata Dziaba. They separated in 1996
Why in the news: Having shot to fame with 'Riverdance' in 1994 and subsequently toured the world with his own show, 'Lord of the Dance', he performs for the last time in Ireland this weekend, at the RDS

Aren't we a great little country?

We tut tut about English violence, but what about our own thuggery? asks **Fr Colm Kilcoyne**

KILTORMER is in County Galway. Last November the local hurling team was beaten in a match. After the game a large number of local men went to a pub.

At 3am, one client left. He was kicked to death while he lay unconscious on the ground outside. The case came up last Wednesday. The judge adjourned sentencing until October.

We hear a lot about urban violence and too little about the soaring level of rural thuggery. The cameras were in Marseilles and Lens so we saw it all. They are never outside rural pubs when they close at 3am. So we hear nothing, unless there is a tragedy.

Incidentally, 3am raises questions which I'm sure the local guards are asking themselves. If not, they should know that others are.

What happened in Kiltormer was a tragedy. The kind of tragedy just waiting to happen in many another place. There is a culture of violence developing around sport, drink and discos. It leads to many a smashed head, vandalised cars and terrorised locals. The most frightening thing about it is that we are not prepared to admit either its existence or seriousness. We refuse to face into the kind of analysis that might lead to finding reasons for the violence. Until we do that, we can't get solutions. Instead we drift, creating a culture we dare not examine.

Even when there is a tragedy, our reaction is emotional and superficial. We wonder how this could happen in our place. Come on. We know well. It happened because we hadn't the courage as a community to face facts.

It is now almost regulation for the young people in the area to be traumatised and to get counselling. It might be more productive if counsellors and others had got ahead of the tragedy and helped the young people think through the consequences of local social patterns.

The media do their usual pieces about grief-stricken closely knit communities. The guards will be all over the place, taking measurements.

In a short time, the counsellors, the media and the Gardai move onto the next tragedy. Leaving behind a community that has learnt nothing and forgotten nothing. Only the families touched by the tragedy suffer long-term anguish.

Officially, there is no problem. Only unfortunate accidents. A young fellow gets beaten within an inch of his life after a disco. Unfortunate accident. But if a community tolerates fights after every disco, how can you call serious injury an unfortunate accident?

Often these things are organised on the lines of the old-fashioned faction fights. One time, hard men from certain villages would decide to have a go at each other after a fair. Crack some skulls for the hell of it. Pre-arranged. Now, in the updated version, the draw is made at school. Tell this to post-primary teachers and they won't believe you. Ask teenagers and they'll say "sure, it happens".

It really is hard to get a sense of reality about some dark elements in the culture of rural Ireland.

Instead, we scapegoat the old enemy and say we aren't as bad as the English. Moral superiority over

> Moral superiority over football hooligans is all we have left when we compare ourselves to England

English football hooligans is one of the few remaining items of moral superiority left to us when we compare ourselves to England. We have all the other problems we used to be so smug about. Hooliganism has been the last difference in our cultures. Haven't we the best fans in Europe. Never any trouble.

Give us time.

I don't know the reasons for our tolerance of violence. Or why it is there at all. Some say it is the videos and films. Others say we haven't a clue what under-age drinking does to the chemistry of the young person. Some blame the schools or the guards and some blame the parents. Or the young people themselves.

About all we can say for certain is that no one category is fully to blame. The problem is bigger than any one of them in isolation. But it would be a devil altogether if our economic boom gave us better roads, larger hospitals and fancier homes and yet failed to stem the vulgarisation of our society.

And yes, I know all this reads grouchy. And that thousands of years ago some Roman said something similar about his time. And I know I'm ignoring the quiet decency of the vast majority of young people.

To that extent what I have written is unbalanced. But sometimes you have to skip the balance to get heard.

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